

Cultural and creative activities at school are far more than an enjoyable break from learning. They encourage pupils to develop key skills that can help them later on. Children and teenagers from families whose standard of living is below the average have the most to gain from these activities, science journalist Mark Mieras discovered. This document summarises the main points of his literature review on this topic. How can arts and cultural education help build an equal opportunities society?



[ summary, September 2024 ]

# Hopeful education

## How art creates equal opportunities

- The circumstances into which you are born have a major impact on your future. Children from families with a high socioeconomic status do better for themselves than those whose home situation offers fewer opportunities.
- This is mainly because the first group are more likely to learn to be hopeful. They learn to believe in themselves, regulate their emotions and steer themselves in the right direction.
- Children whose circumstances do not encourage this mindset are still able to develop these skills. Cultural or creative activities can help make this happen.
- These kinds of activities help children and young people be more hopeful.
- Cultural and creative activities also awaken hidden talents and help narrow the gaps between young people with more or fewer opportunities.

The circumstances into which you are born impact your future. Children who come from high-income families and have university-educated parents (high socioeconomic status) tend to do better for themselves. They learn at faster pace, receive a higher level of schooling and are less likely to drop out than children whose home situation offers fewer opportunities. This is not primarily a matter of intelligence. It's mainly because these pupils have

learned to be hopeful, to believe in themselves, to be creative, to regulate their emotions and to steer themselves in the right direction; they have discovered that you achieve more when you challenge yourself. Cultural activities such as music, theatre and drawing can encourage development of these 'metacognitive' skills and enable disadvantaged pupils to catch up.

Dance stimulates the motor skills, drawing helps pupils become more visually perceptive and music enhances their listening skills. All these forms of artistic input also encourage curiosity, self-directed learning skills and creativity, to name but a few key areas. The greatest effect is found amongst pupils who are most in need of support: children from low-income families whose parents are less well-educated (low socioeconomic status) and children with congenital developmental delays, such as dyslexia. In other words, these activities can help them make up for any shortfall. Dancing, acting and making music enables these pupils to develop along with the rest of the group. Art also appears to press the right buttons and stimulate key brain functions.

### Self-directed learning skills

Growing up involves learning all kinds of things; we even have to learn how to learn. Learning involves skills such as focused attention, a sound working memory, being flexible and exercising self-control by reining yourself in. These self-directed skills (executive functions) largely determine how you

navigate your years at school and also how you fare afterwards, both at work and in your personal life. Unfortunately, children from families with a low socioeconomic status are less challenged at home to focus their attention, use their working memory, exercise self-control and solve problems flexibly. They lag behind in self-directed learning from an early age. This means that they are less able to ignore distractions, resist temptation and step back from events that make them anxious or aggressive. As a result, they are more likely to show problem behaviour.

The good news is that practising self-directed learning skills can lead to improvement, especially at a young age. Practice occurs as part of challenging activities that require you to act on your own initiative, such as imaginative play, drama, dance and music.

### Inquiring minds

Curiosity is another area in which disadvantaged pupils can fall behind. On average, children from families who experience greater levels of poverty and stress ask fewer 'why' questions and are less inquisitive than other children. This is detrimental, because curiosity helps children develop and learn. Curiosity is even more important for these children because their home environment offers them fewer opportunities to develop and so they need to find out more for themselves. Curiosity is also important in later life. Inquisitive employees are more open and eager to learn, less likely to feel threatened and better able to handle new and conflicting experiences.

Curiosity tends to thrive in settings where children experience autonomy. Many aspects of the school curriculum offer little scope for this. Cultural subjects, along with science and technology, are oases of autonomy and this can make them a source of curiosity.

### Creative self-confidence

Even creativity is unfairly distributed. The higher the socioeconomic status of a family, the easier it is for the children to come up with new ideas and the better they are at handling dilemmas and problems. Conversely, children who have fewer opportunities at home often do not dare to set themselves creative goals. And when they do, they are more

likely to encounter a barrier, quicker to give up and more reluctant to try again. Their creative self-doubt becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Creative practice can break this negative spiral. Open-ended assignments encourage them to pursue their own ideas, to experiment and to find the courage to make mistakes. Pupils who were challenged in the course of a year to be creative with a pencil and a brush or through dance or music went on to achieve higher scores for creative thinking. The same applied to museum visits and lessons in which pupils experiment with science, technology, engineering and mathematics.

### Hopeful

Children and teenagers from families with a low socioeconomic status therefore have a shortfall across a range of metacognitive skills. Researchers believe that they have found the underlying cause in lack of hope. On average, children from these families are less hopeful, and lack of hope leads to less creativity, less creative self-confidence and lack of self-directed learning skills. Hope also affects children's academic results. This is hardly surprising when you consider that hopeful people are better at working out ways to achieve their goals and more likely to see obstacles as challenges to be met. They have alternative routes at their disposal: if they can't achieve their goal one way, they will find another. Conversely, lack of hope is one of the main reasons why pupils drop out of school.

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**'Hope can be created by encouraging curiosity in pupils. Arts and culture help make that happen.'**

Hope can be created by encouraging curiosity in pupils and enabling them to put their own ambitions into practice. Joyful activities such as sports and the arts can help make this happen.

### Social support and identity

Social support helps people find hope. Positive social bonds between pupils are another contributing factor. That's why the social climate at school is so important, and arts education can help

create such a climate. Acting together creates a more sociable mindset amongst young children and primary school pupils. Music also helps create a positive social climate in the classroom. After engaging in musical activities, children find it easier to collaborate and make contact with each other. In this regard too, the effect is strongest for pupils from families with a low socioeconomic status. In one experiment, children from this group were randomly assigned to either dance classes or attention training. Only amongst the dancers was there a notable decrease in problem behaviour and an improvement in social ability.

A positive identity also helps pupils be hopeful. Experiencing success in the classroom can help build that identity. This makes playing music, dancing, acting and participating in sports a doubly powerful exercise in hope, not only by creating social support but also by reinforcing a sense of identity.

### Hidden talents

As we have seen, pupils from families with a low socioeconomic status share disadvantages in key skills. But there are also skills in which they achieve above average scores. They have a keen eye for sincerity, for example, and are more adept at interpreting the thoughts and feelings of others. They are often better at recognising patterns, both visual and auditory, are above average storytellers and have a more acute narrative insight. Researchers refer to these talents as 'hidden' because they are usually overlooked within the school system, and are not assessed in tests. This means that the school mainly underlines the inability of these pupils and undermines their self-confidence.

In addition, children from families with a low socioeconomic status feel uncomfortable in a performance culture where pupils compete with each other for the highest grades. This is because they – on average – also have a better understanding of interdependence and social class, another of their hidden talents.

Creative and cultural activities therefore provide a good match for these hidden talents, offering pupils from less prosperous families a learning environment and school culture in which they are more likely to flourish and make a positive impression.

### Conclusion

The circumstances into which you are born have a major impact on your future. How much stress are you exposed to? How are you stimulated, challenged and supported at home? This determines the development of factors such as self-directed learning, creative self-confidence, curiosity and self-esteem.

The difference between being hopeful or lacking hope lies at the heart of these interwoven skills. To create equal opportunities, education therefore needs to be a source of hope. Being hopeful requires social support and a positive identity. Coming together to play music, dance, act and participate in sports stimulates both of these areas and therefore contributes greatly to hope.

Creative and cultural activities help a school to reduce the disparities between advantaged and disadvantaged young people and to prevent the magnification of these disparities. Magnification arises in an education system where the primary focus is on skills such as self-directed learning and social competition, skills in which disadvantaged pupils fall short. That same system undervalues the skills in which they tend to excel, such as empathy, storytelling and pattern recognition.

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## 'The hidden talents of disadvantaged children are usually overlooked within the school system'

A cultural, socially aware and non-competitive school culture can help disadvantaged pupils thrive and learn to be hopeful. This is achieved by placing greater emphasis on activities driven by intrinsic motivation and personal ambition, such as drawing, making music, theatre, dance, sports and exploration. Activities that foster the realisation that, as a pupil, you can make the things you want to happen happen.

Mark Mieras is a science journalist who specialises in cognitive development. His publications include literature reviews on early childhood development and the effect that music, outdoor play and encounters with the natural world have on children. (see: [www.mieras.nl](http://www.mieras.nl))